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ABSTRACT

Standard English must be considered as a language that can and should be learned and used by any human who finds it advantageous to do so, but which has no more exotic and virtuous qualities than any other language or dialect. The teacher of standard English to speakers of Black English should be aware of the kinds of language skills that children acquire before they enter school; speakers of Black English understand a wide range of registers and styles of standard English, as well as several dialects of English. The teacher must understand the underlying principles of the student's dialect and the system of rules governing his speech. The teacher must consider the values of the child and consider with whom the child identifies and for what reasons. The teacher can then deal with the possibility of commanding a full range of styles and registers of two dialects, the advantages of being able to switch dialects, and methods of teaching a second dialect. (Author/VM)

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COLONIALISM IN THE CLASSROOM: TEACHING "GOOD" GRAMMAR TO BLACK CHILDREN

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When one group colonizes another, it must take certain steps to establish its devine right to rule. It must make its avowed superiority felt and accepted by the colonized so that it may rule not by the gun, but by psychological domination. One way to hasten this process is to convince the colonized that he represents the anthesis of what is ethical, refined, and cultured.

The language of a people, that which expresses his world, is attacked by the colonizer because it represents one of the most logical areas in which to begin the process of subjugation. Frantz Fanon, black psychiatrist and author of The Wretched of the Earth, which describes the struggle for independence in Algeria states:

> To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization (Fanon, 1963).

"Colonialism", as used in this paper will refer to the forced acculturation of Blacks in America; under which is subsumed language changes and the concomitant changes in behavior, attitudes, and values. It will refer to this process, which has been termed "cultural imperialism", that was carried out under the

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guise of providing every man with the tools to assimilate and to reap the benefits of middle-class America, while in fact, assimilation was forbidden the masses of Blacks, the process serving primarily to discredit their linguistic and cultural heritage.

Black English (BE), its structure and function, has recently generated great interest for those who view the failure in the ghetto schools as a direct result of many years of colonialist thought and action in those schools. Well-meaning linguists whose task is to describe languages, have written much to establish BE as a systematic, rule-governed dialect of English which is just as "valid" as any other dialect of English. Psychologists, educators, and curriculum specialists have pooled their resources to design materials written in BE in hopes that these materials will give more prestige to BE, thus elevating the self-concept of the reader.

Such efforts to legitmize BE have made it necessary for the scholar to become as knowledgeable about the culture of poverty, race relations, attitudes and values, and social change as he is on matters related to language acquisition, human learning and motivation, and the science of teaching. Though such a shift in focus may be long overdue, the over-emphasis on the need to understand the psycho-social variables may be bane, not blessing. We must find a workable balance between liberalism predicated upon repenting for real and imagined sins, and scholarly investigation of the issues.

The basic tenets of our long-standing institutions are being challenged in the wake of what might be described as a period of decolonization; a process Fanon (1963) describes as "... the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature". Presently we are faced with two conflicting forces in our schools generally, and particularly in the English class. One force demands that all students become functional in standard English (SE); defined as "... the kind of English habitually used by most educated English-speaking persons in the United States" (Allen, 1967). The other force, mostly poor Blacks, is rejecting these demands. Blacks have found that largely through their dialect they can express certain feelings, perpetuate group identity and cohesiveness, and help to ressurect and maintain cultural pride. They have become keenly aware that it is not because of their use, or misuse of English that they have been rejected and oppressed. They realize that they are rejected for reasons not remotely related to language (and too numerous to relate here), and that the negative attitudes toward their language, walk, dress, mannerisms, and physical features reflect the negative attitudes toward the group. This awareness makes Blacks view attempts to raise their self-esteem by raising the status of BE as spurious efforts at best, and at worse a cruel hoax. Thus, there is overt resistance to being further "co-opted", i.e., to being made to talk and act like whites. A university student recently suggested to me that putting a period at the end of a sentence constituted doing a "white thing".

Though such anecdotes may initially evoke laughter, the consequences of such feelings are grave both for the student and the teacher in the inner-city school. The psychological resistance to learning SE by many black students vastly minimizes the chances that they will learn it. This situation is compounded by the fact that their perceptions of themselves, their culture, language, needs and values are diametrically opposed to the teachers. Often she is neutralized or forced to flee the ghetto school because of her ineffectiveness and despair. William Labov's study in New York City deals with the failure of the ghetto schools. He states:

> ...The school environment and school values are plainly not influencing the boys firmly grounded in street culture.
> ...teachers in the city schools have little ability to reward or punish members of the street culture, or to motivate learning (Labov, 1968).

These teachers have been entrusted with the task of making their black students use "correct" SE. They attempt to change the dialect speakers' phrase structure, his use of lexical items, and his phonology by explaining how SE achieves structural sense.

It is the assertion of this author that there is little validity in the claim that teaching the rules of SE grammar to speakers of BE increases proficiency in the use of SE and that the primary objective of changing the dialect speakers' language habits is to make him more socially acceptable. All language arts teachers of speakers of BE should seriously question why they teach grammar at all. Further, it is imperative that they take several steps

before they can begin to intelligently deal with the pros and cons of teaching the rules of SE grammar to facilitate the use of SE.

1. They should become fully aware of what grammars are.
2. They should know the developmental sequence in natural language learning.
3. They should attempt to determine the amount and type of linguistic knowledge each child has when he enters the class.
4. They must know the grammar, and in particular the phonology and lexicon of BE.
5. Finally, they should become aware of the culture, values, and attitudes of the students, who their linguistic models are, and how they as teachers can help the child to develop and broaden his linguistic skills.

Grammars are descriptions of the structure of languages; i.e., the ways in which languages achieve structural sense. Descriptive grammarians attempt to systematically and objectively describe the total system of a language. The task of the generative grammarian is to explain how sentences are produced by identifying a system of rules that can be used in new and untried combinations to form new sentences. Transformational grammarians are concerned with a set of rules which related the underlying logical structures (deep structures) to their phonemic (surface) representations. The transformational component of a grammar consists of a partially ordered set of rules which can change the order of the constituents of a sentence, insert new elements into a sentence, and delete elements from a sentence with the constraint that the transformational operations cannot change the "deep structure" of the sentence. Transformational grammar focuses on "well-formed" sentences (Legum, Williams, & Lee, 1969).

All human languages and dialects have an underlying system of grammatical rules which is internalized by the native speaker because of cultural and environmental stimuli, as well as innate learning

procedures which Chomsky (1966) describes as part of the "intrinsic organization of cognition". Rules of grammar are statements of fact and have nothing to do with good or bad, status or prestige. Yet we find many language arts teachers concerned with grammar as prescription and grammar as remedy as it relates to "correct" usage, social acceptance,and upward mobility. They have become more concerned with how people should speak and write, than how they do speak and write. Teachers often do not distinguish between grammatical correctness and social acceptability; what is "unacceptable" in the prestige dialect (SE in America) is "incorrect" and stigmatized. Grammar is no longer a man-made set of factual rules but something "good" entrusted by God to men who have the intelligence and power to determine who is worthy and able to have it, use it well, and thus reap the many benefits that such a possession affords. Those whom he can convert are the "worthy", those whom he fails to convert are the "weak", the "unfit", and the "unworthy". Most of the non-converts are members of ethnic minorities and the lower socio-economic class. Perhaps the innate biological and/or intellectual characteristics of these groups have something to do with their ability to learn and use "good" grammar and the issue is more closely related to the theory of the survival of the fittest than to any theories of language acquisition and language attitudes.

Concerning natural language learning, linguists have made distinctions between that which is acquired through learning and experience, and that unique cognitive facility inherent in humans which allows them to learn language with no training. In describing man's complex innate capacity for language which neither the

psychologist nor the linguist has achieved a theoretical understanding, Chomsky states:

> The fact that all normal children acquire essentially comparable grammars of great complexity with remarkable rapidity suggests that human beings are somehow specifically designed to do this, with data-handling or "hypothesis-formulating" ability of unknown character and complexity (Chomsky, 1959).

By school age, language is well established in children. They have mastered the system of rules for pronunciation of the words they know, they distinguish parts of speech, recognize and produce grammatically correct sentences in their language, combine smaller sentences into larger ones, make statements and ask questions, use imperative sentences to command and negative sentences to deny, and use this complex linguistic system to communicate their ideas and feelings (Arthur, 1971). Yet, it is too often the case that English teachers attempt to teach these variables when, in fact the child has already acquired the skills by the time he enters school.

When the child has learned and internalized a different set of rules from that of SE, the teacher feels compelled to make the child learn to use SE. He usually starts from three faulty premises; first that the dialect speaker has not acquired a systematic and rule-governed language system of his own, secondly, the non-standard forms which he has acquired should and can be replaced by SE forms, and finally, that the degree to which the child can speak, orally read, and write SE is an adequate measure of his acquisition and comprehension of SE language skills. Were the teachers more aware of the <u>kinds</u> of language skills children acquire before they enter school, they could more effectively devise methods for measur-

ing such skills. Teachers often measure these skills by giving oral reading tests, speech perception tests, and by evaluating student generated writing with no knowledge of how or when these skills are acquired, nor which skills the children comprehend even though they can not demonstrate them. It is here that the critical distinction between one's understanding and his ability to demonstrate that which he understands must be made.

Arthur (1971) distinguishes between "passive" and "active" language skills to separate comprehension from usage. He states:

> ... The learner's ability to use a new language feature (a new word, a new sentence structure, etc.) actively in his own speech is preceded by an extended time during which the learner indicates an emerging passive recognition of that language feature in the speech of others. More briefly, comprehension (an indication of passive mastery) precedes production (an indication of active mastery).

A very young child understands far more words than he can produce. Further, passive skills like understanding (listening) and reading develop ahead of their active counterparts, speaking and writing (Arthur, 1971).

Speakers of Black Dialect understand a wide range of registers and styles of Standard English, as well as several dialects of English. Too often people think of BE as if it were a language whose entire grammatical system were completely different from that of SE; as if BE were one part of a BE-SE dichotomy which has no range of comprehension and/or usage between. Readers have been named "Everyday Talk" and "School Talk", "Play Clothes" and "Sunday Clothes" as if Black children must view SE as something special and different, to be

used in a way similar to the way we get out our good china and silver on holidays or when the boss comes to dinner.

The point is that speakers of BE use SE features regularly and they comprehend far more than they can "actively" produce. Teachers must devise methods to measure this linguistic knowledge different from those methods which rely on the child's ability to write, speak, or orally read in SE. To put it another way, we assume that the teachers of BE understand enough of their students' dialect to maintain a quite adequate two-way communication with them. Yet, we do not make this assumption because the SE speaker can speak dialect as well as any Amos 'n Andy character, write in dialect as eloquently as Paul Laurence Dunbar, and read this dialect aloud with little hesitation and few errors. No, we assume that he understands the children because he has acquired passive mastery through contact with the children without acquiring "active" mastery. Such is <u>also</u> the case with the BE speaker; he <u>understands</u> SE even though he has not acquired active mastery. Why, then, must the children gain active mastery of SE language skills if he and the SE speaker can already effectively communicate when each uses his respective dialect? Have we not returned to colonialism, social acceptability, and oppression? If, however,we come up with just reasons for making BE speakers become proficient in actively using SE, the teacher must then turn to the issue of methods.

Teachers must understand the underlying principles of the students' dialect, the system of rules which give the dialect structural sense as a prerequisite for effectively teaching the language arts.

Furthermore, such knowledge must precede the formulation of empirically testable questions related to the ability of a child to "actively" produce a dialect other than his own. Too often "mistakes" in oral reading, such as final consonant cluster simplification, differences in the system of homonyms, (such as told=toe or past=pass=passed) are not mistakes at all, but features of BE. Were those, along with numerous other features of BE, known to the teacher her task as well as her attitude could be radically changed. Currently, her task is often one of correcting that which is correct, and for the wrong reason, that of making the child conform to standards often predicated upon linguistic and social snobbery. Thus, the teacher becomes the linguistic and cultural model to an unreceptive and often hostile child. She represents just another in a series of those models imposed upon the child in school: the cultural and refined SE speaker, the good American who can not tell a lie about a cherry tree, the courageous yellow-hairs who tamed the west so that we may now ride trains, and the technicians who are brilliant enough to design and create a country that will never become a second-rate power. What can the colonized do or say in the face of such evidence of superiority and "rightness" but to try desperately to conform--or to challenge the credibility of the models? It appears that currently many are turning to the latter approach.

What models does the the black child choose to emulate? Are his linguistic models that dialect speakers of the Amos 'n Andy type,

or is this dialect vehemently rejected as that which only a stupid or "country" nigger would use? Or is his linguistic model one who speaks standard English but who knows "where it's at" and can "get down funky" when he needs or wants to, i.e., who uses not only phonological, syntactic and lexical features of the dialect, but also intonation, body movement, and style to convey the message and its attendant emotional tone? What role do cursing and slang play in determining whose speech children model, i.e., when one "gets down", is he merely masterfully using in-group slang although he is speaking standard English? Or is this possible; i.e., can a man say "That dude is a bad mother" in Standard English? Who does the black child identify with and for what reasons? Once the teacher can answer these questions related to the values of the child, she may then turn to questions dealing with the possibility of commanding a full range of styles and registers of two dialects, the advantages of being able to dialect switch, methods of teaching a second dialect, etc. A great deal of effort has been put into trying to convince BE speakers that it is to their advantage to know how to use SE. And again, we have given the wrong reasons. We tell the child that he must speak SE to "make it" in 20th century America when he knows at a very early age that his "making it" might have little to do with his language. We tell him it is useful for communication, as if his own dialect were not as useful. We make it appear that SE has special qualities that BE doesn't have, and that it is reserved for the chosen few. Labov (1968) makes this point when he states:

> ... Most importantly, there must be a strong program for breaking down the identification of Standard English

> with white society. The NNE (Northern Negro English) youngster should be made to feel that he has as much claim to standard English as anyone else. If he is not being given the ability to read and write this language, then he is being cheated out of something that is rightfully his."

Thus, we have returned to the original premise; i.e., that because of colonialist thought and action, SE has been used as a tool to oppress, reserved for the colonizer and his willing and able converts. We must now put SE in its rightful place; i.e., as a language that can and should be learned and used by any human who finds it advantageous to do so, but which has no more exotic and virtuous qualities than any other language or dialect. Robert H. Bentley (1971), in response to Professor Sledds comments in "Bi-Dialectalism: The Linguistics of White Supremacy" states:

> Our number one priority must be to spread the word to educated society that dialects, both geographic and social, are real, legitimate, "legal", deserving of respect, and a fact of language. We must become militant on this point.

Though I agree with Professor Bently, I think that he has made some serious omissions; first, the word must be spread to un-educated society as well, for it is there that the effects of this ignorance and oppression are felt most.

Secondly, before we can impress the validity of dialects upon people, we must "become militant" in pointing out that Black people, not their language, are "real", "legitimate", "legal","deserving of respect", and a fact of the human race.

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